

JON ABBOTT CONSIDERS THE PROGRAMME GUIDELINES THAT GOVERN WHAT CAN AND CAN'T BE SEEN ON BROADCAST TV

'THERE IS an *absolute ban* on the following: jokes about lavatories, effeminacy in men, and immorality of any kind . . . suggestive references to honeymoon couples, chambermaids, fig leaves, prostitution, ladies' underwear, animal habits (eg rabbits), lodgers and commercial travellers.'

Had you all puzzled there for a minute, didn't I, but that last bit about 'commercial travellers and chambermaids' doubtless gave it away.

Seeing as how *What Video* recently ran details of the BBC's latest guidelines on programme standards, I thought you might enjoy a glance at the guidelines as decreed 40 years ago.

What is particularly amusing about this '50s version is that today it reads like a capsule description of the output of British TV for the last 20 years.

It could be a summary of the contents of an average week's light entertainment, not to mention a concise description of *'Allo 'Allo*, the much publicized favourite programme of Lord William Rees-Mogg, head of the Broadcast Standards Council.

Unfortunately, most censorship isn't funny — it's just blackly comic, the dark side of human behaviour made to look ridiculous.

THERE WAS the episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man* about Irish terror-

ists, for example, titled *Outrage In Balinderry*, which featured a terrorist group called the IBA. Or there was the attack on a police car cut from the comedy film *Police Academy* . . . because someone got it into their head that people would liken it to the real-life ambush of two British soldiers in Ireland by an angry mob.

Then there was the complaint to *Right To Reply* about a car ad that implied the product would 'take your breath away'. Some obscure connection was made between that expression — from a *Berlin* song, referring to a gasp of admiration — and a horrible incident in the news about people being asphyxiated at a football game.

What people could possibly have made such obscure connections, and where does that line of thinking lead?

Maybe to the concerned father who wanted *Master Of The Universe* taken off the air because it encouraged his kids to play energetically in the garden.

Most bizarre of all was the group of TV watchdogs who insisted that they'd seen Mighty Mouse snorting cocaine on Saturday morning kids TV in the US. The producers insisted that Mighty Mouse had in fact been partaking of the pollen in a flower.

Unfortunately for the network concerned, the credibility of the animator was demolished when it came to light that the cartoon maker in question was Ralph Bakshi . . . who some years earlier had made the notorious X-rated *Fritz The Cat* cartoons.

Then, stateside again, there was the occasion when some kids broke into a religious cable station and flashed on live TV. And, worse still, the time a careless cable operator, playing hardcore adult videos for himself on the machinery, accidentally transmitted his own private entertainment instead of the programme tape — again, on a local bible-thumping channel.

MOST TV censorship is silly at best, sinister at worst. The latest storm in a very small tea cup in the US is over a funny little sit-com titled *Married — With Children* running on the Fox network, and also in some ITV regions late at night.

Married — With Children demolishes the TV myth of the cute I-love-you family with a vengeance, and stars Ed O'Neill and Katey Sagal as the gross and gruesome Bundys.

Married is doing for the perfect TV family what *Moonlighting*, *Police Squad* and *Sledge Hammer* did for crime shows. Naturally, no show this adventurous can be allowed to just get on with it, and the critics have glided in, just as they did years earlier for *All In The Family* and *Soap* . . .

Leading the shoal is 'campaigning mother and good citizen' Terry Rakolta, who in time-honoured tradition attacks the show by bullying the advertisers with threats of 'boycotts', the same McCarthyite tactics that pres-

SEX LIES AND



sure groups employed to harass *Soap* and *Lou Grant* off the air in the late '70s.

Rakolta eventually backed down in the face of a hostile, mocking press (now there's a switch from the baying jackals of the *British* tabloids).

ONE OF the most interesting aspects of all this is how readily television itself participates in its own woes.

As trade paper *Variety* pointed out, Rakolta was able to use TV to promote her own *anti*-television campaign, immediately appearing on several talk shows, just as Mary Whitehouse always manages to push the views of the *National Viewers and Listeners Association* on chat shows and debates over here.

In an article on the US networks in *The Listener*, writer Michael Pye points out that 'when a single Robin Williams joke can make New York's Cardinal denounce TV as a "radioactive wasteland of filth" — and the networks reverentially report his opinion — the same networks will have to be clever to win back the moral ground they've foolishly given away.'

One is immediately reminded of how ITV and the BBC panicked and cleared their schedules for two months when the *Daily Mail* erroneously reported that the Michael Ryan rampage in Hungerford had been *Rambo*-influenced.

Did Michael Ryan have a video recorder in his house? Did he watch much TV? If anybody thought to ask in all the acres of newsprint, I must have missed it.

But one programme was *not* removed from the schedules after Ryan's killing spree — BBC 2's *Star Shot*, in which manly celebrities take pot shots at targets, in competition. This little darling stayed exactly where it had been scheduled — early in the evening.

Particularly interesting was that a few days after the incident, I watched an episode of *Kojak* that I'd time-shifted a couple of weeks earlier.

Titled *Acts Of Desperate Men*, it

offered a moving and fascinating study of a young man who had gone on the rampage with a gun, indiscriminately shooting at people.

It was a good drama, very well played, and made a number of valid observations about just such a tragedy.

And yet, with the episode description it had, and the description and country of origin of the programme, had it been scheduled just two weeks later, my ITV region would almost certainly have pulled it off the air.

AS A selective TV viewer, it infuriates me that quality television series such as *Crime Story* (midnight in a handful of ITV regions only) and *Wiseguy* — currently running on Sky — have to take their chances in the video rental market because TV bosses are too

VIDEOTAPE



- ◀ scared to let their programme buyers purchase them.

MP Gerald Howarth, dark-suited guardian of morality who had his 15 minutes of fame some months back with a censorship bill, had no qualms about sitting down with his kids to Saturday tea-time with *The A-Team*. He mentioned the series specifically.

I don't have any qualms about the show either. In fact, I'm a great admirer of all Stephen Cannell's 20-plus TV ventures... but then I'm not trying to get political mileage out of stamping out 'TV violence'.

Rees-Mogg's favourite escapist fantasy is *'Allo 'Allo*, a xenophobic sitcom which makes a mockery out of the French Resistance with the aid of Clouseau voices and heavy-handed sexual innuendo.

He, however, while being a bird of the same feather as Howarth, does not approve of the morally superior *The A-Team*, which advocates the kind of selfless heroism that *'Allo 'Allo* ridicules.

Now, I personally enjoy Stephen

Cannell's TV series, although on a list of favourite Cannell productions, *The A-Team* would be way below *The Rockford Files*, *Wiseguy*, and maybe half-a-dozen others, and while I would happily ogle TV nudity, 'gratuitous' or otherwise, the merest mention of an impending *'Allo 'Allo* has me vacating the room faster than a prude at a strip show.

I must have seen every episode of *The A-Team*, and so have 17 million other viewers, but almost everyone I have ever mentioned the show to groans at the mere thought of it.

And yet, for every *A-Team* fan I've ever met, I must have encountered a reasonably sane, intelligent individual who thought that *'Allo 'Allo* was wonderful.

EASTENDERS PULLS 19 million viewers. *The A-Team* had 17 million. A *Tom and Jerry* cartoon can attract five, maybe six million viewers.

These aren't 'affiliated' viewers, or those who signed a piece of paper in a shopping precinct thinking that the questionnaire referred to some other guy's show. These are people who made a specific conscious decision to watch a particular channel at a particular time.

The highest rated programme on the minority channels — that's BBC2 or C4 — pulls in between four and six million viewers. An old black and white

sit-com — say, *Mr Ed* or *The Beverly Hillbillies* — is watched by over a million. *Coronation Street* has more than 20 million regular viewers.

But should we have guidelines for the programme-makers and the creative (and not-so-creative) talents, or should we simply offer guidelines for the viewers so that they know what they're getting if they choose to watch?

If we try and ban the really offensive rubbish, do we not just make it even more appealing, mysterious and desirable? And who gets to decide what we (you and I) care to watch, and where we (you and I) draw the line?

Personally, I don't believe that it would hurt to actually trust the public. Anyone who's dangerous enough to be triggered off into an orgy of rape and violence after watching TV or video is already a threat.

We don't ban drink just because some people take too much, or motor vehicles just because some people drive dangerously. Let's trust each other.

Most of the really unpleasant garbage I've had to review has rarely stayed in the video rental shops for long, while quality tapes, whether or not they include sexual or violent content, tend to stick around.

As certain video companies and broadcasters are beginning to discover, you can go broke underestimating the taste of the public ○

